

# **COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN TEACHER TALK: A CASE STUDY IN MALAYSIAN ESL CLASSROOMS**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN TEACHER TALK: A CASE STUDY IN MALAYSIAN ESL CLASSROOMS**

Ch'ng Looi Chin

Communication strategies (CS) are used by language speakers to help them to get their meaning across. For learners, CS served as tool to compensate for their target language deficiency. However, little is known on the use of CS among teachers in their teaching. This study thus examined to what extent the proficiency level of learners influenced the use of communication strategies by the teachers in their teacher talk in order to deliver their lessons effectively. The study involved three ESL teachers. Data were obtained from audio observation of classes of different proficiency levels at a school in Samarahan Division, Sarawak. The verbal data were analysed based on the theoretical framework of Faerch and Kasper (1984), Tarone (1978) and Clennell (1995) on the use of CS by teachers. The types of teacher talk were analysed based on Flander's Interaction Analysis Category (Flander, 1970). The findings showed that proficiency level of the students influenced teachers' use of communication strategies in different types of teacher talk to compensate for students' language deficiency. In general, CS were regularly used by teachers in both classes of high and low proficiency level when giving lecture and asking students questions in order to enhance message and make message salient to the students. The common CS used include tonicity, lexical repetition and language switch. Nevertheless, it was also noted these CS were more frequently used by teachers in low proficiency classes especially during prompting, giving directions and accepting students' ideas. This could probably due to greater language deficiency faced by this group of students. On the whole, the study found out that ESL classroom interactions in this school were mainly one-way communication where the teachers made the most talking by using Clennell's (1995) discourse-based CS (tonicity, lexical repetition and topic fronting) to maintain their teacher talk in both high and low proficiency classes.

## **ABSTRAK**

### **STRATEGI KOMUNIKASI DALAM PENUTURAN GURU: SATU KAJIAN KES DALAM KELAS BAHASA INGGERIS SEBAGAI BAHASA KEDUA**

*Ch'ng Looi Chin*

*Strategi komunikasi (CS) sering digunakan oleh pengguna bahasa dengan tujuan untuk menyampaikan maksud yang dikehendaki. Secara sedar ataupun tidak, CS sering digunapakai apabila mereka menghadapi masalah dalam komunikasi. Terdapat banyak kajian yang telah dijalankan untuk mengenalpasti jenis-jenis CS yang digunakan oleh pelajar bahasa sebagai satu cara untuk menebus kelemahan yang ada pada diri. Namun, kajian terhadap cara gunaan CS dalam kalangan guru masih tidak mendalam. Dengan itu, kajian ini bertujuan mengenalpasti saling kaitan antara tahap penguasaan Bahasa Inggeris pelajar dan jenis-jenis CS yang digunakan dalam penuturan guru. Kajian ini dijalankan ke atas tiga orang guru yang mengajar kelas-kelas yang berbeza dari segi penguasaan Bahasa Inggeris di sebuah sekolah dalam Bahagian Samarahan, Sarawak. Data untuk kajian diperolehi melalui rakaman lisan dan transkripsi rakaman penuturan dianalisa berdasarkan model CS yang dikenalpasti oleh Faerch dan Kasper (1984), Tarone (1978) dan Clennell (1995). Jenis penuturan guru pula dianalisa mengikut Kategori Analisis Interaksi Flander (Flander, 1970). Hasil kajian menunjukkan terhadap hubungan kait yang rapat antara tahap penguasaan bahasa pelajar dengan jenis-jenis CS yang digunapakai oleh guru-guru dalam penuturan mereka. CS lebih kerap digunakan oleh guru semasa menyampaikan kuliah dan mengajukan pertanyaan kepada pelajar. Keadaan ini bertujuan untuk memastikan mesej yang hendak disampaikan dapat diterima oleh pelajar. Secara amnya, kelas Bahasa Inggeris di sekolah ini lebih didominasi oleh penuturan guru dan guru sering menggunakan CS jenis wacana yang diperkenalkan oleh Clennell.*

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

CS	Communication Strategies
IL	Interlanguage
L1	First Language
L2	Second Language
TL	Target Language
FLAC	Flander's Interaction Analysis Category
ESL	English as Second Language
EFL	English as Foreign Language
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
ELT	English Language Teaching
PMR	Lower-Secondary Examination ( <i>Penilaian Menengah Rendah</i> )

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.0 Overview**

This chapter presents the background of the study. In particular, it illustrates the existing body of knowledge on the related of communication strategies (CS) and at the same time brings forth its pertinent gaps. The underlying objectives of the study are also presented followed by the significance of the study. This chapter then end with the operational definition of terms, which are important in this study.

#### **1.1 Background of the research problem**

One of the most primary goals of second language study is the development of communicative competence in languages. This development is indeed very pivotal especially in everyday social or work interactions and to establish relationships or to convey message to others. (Massachusetts Department of Education, n.d.) In order to produce the target language (TL) for these communication purposes, second language speakers often employ strategies or “strategic plans” to get meaning across (Faerch & Kasper, 1984; Tarone, 1981). Such strategies are what Selinker (1972) coined as communication strategies (CS) in his account of the processes responsible for

interlanguage (IL). Generally, IL is a stage that the L2 speaker forms their own linguistic structure of the TL in their brain which is neither achieving the linguistic structure of the target language L2 nor similar with their first language (L1) (Selinker, 1972). Hence, at this stage, the use of CS plays an important role in assisting the L2 speakers to communicate their intended meaning in TL.

Strategic competence or use of CS is one of the four components of communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980) which has been defined differently by various key researchers. For example, Canale and Swain (1980) defined strategic competence as the “verbal or non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate [or to get meaning across successfully] for breakdown in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence” (Canale & Swain, 1980, as cited in Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1991, p. 17). On the other hand, Váradi (1980) explained that CS is utilized by L2 speakers consciously to reduce or replace some elements of meaning or form in the initial plan after they discovered that they have insufficient means to carry out their original plan. This phenomenon of substituting their initial plan to bring message across with a “strategic plan” (Faerch & Kasper, 1980, as cited in Ellis, 1985) or CS is referred as “message adjustment” by Váradi (1980).

It is accepted that there is no one definite definition for CS in particular. According to Faerch and Kasper (1984), CS does not comprise an “objective” class of phenomenon like other analysis process or fixed events by the society. They added that the definition of communication strategies greatly depends on the analyst’s

previous defining criteria based on the analyst's interest. Broadly, CS has been viewed from two major theoretical perspectives: the psycholinguistic view by Faerch and Kasper (1980) and interactional view by Tarone (1978) (as cited in Faerch & Kasper, 1984). Psycholinguistic definition of CS suggested by Faerch and Kasper deals with the individual speaker's experience of communication experience and solution used to overcome a communication barrier. On the contrary, Tarone's interactional view argues that CS is seen as an attempt of both interlocutors in bridging the gap of both interlocutors' linguistic knowledge in real communicative situation to negotiate "shared meaning" which is its central function. However, Clennell's (1995) pragmatic discourse perspective draws on new evidence to bring these two apparently divergent approaches together. Clennell (1995) suggested that, CS does not only act as a potentially conscious plan to solve communication difficulties but these discourse-based strategies also play role to enhance the message and to maintain the conversation at the discourse level.

Most studies on CS concluded that CS plays an important role in second language acquisition (SLA) as well as interlanguage communication. Similarly, Faerch and Kasper (1980) argued that the use of CS has a potential learning effect as it encourages achievement behaviour (risk-taking) rather than reduction behaviour (risk-avoiding). It is mainly based on the grounds that achievement behaviour encourages hypothesis formation within the L2 learners and the risk is crucial for automatization. This is further reinforced by Tarone (1980) that the use of CS, in general, enables learners to keep the channel open and at the same time it helps

learners to expand their resources during verbal exchange with native speakers as they help L2 learners use the right form to say what they want. This is essentially useful for learners to “keep [conversation] going” a stand supported by Hatch (1978) (cited in Ellis, 1985) besides fostering language acquisition and learning. Consequently, interaction of learners are mainly facilitated by CS to foster language learning by reformulating utterances, confirm comprehension and also correct what is said (either implicit or explicit). However, interaction alone is ineffective. Successful interaction will only evolve out of the need to communicate and negotiate or clarify meaning as what has been acknowledged by the L2 theories (Doyle, Goh & Zhang, 2004).

Learners with different levels of proficiency need different CS to assist them to negotiate meaning in order to achieve their interactional goals (Bialystok & Frohlich, 1980; Paribakht, 1985). Hence, a teacher who serves as a language expert plays a pivotal role in ensuring the transformation of TL into input, particularly comprehensible input (Krashen, 1981) to the learners according to their proficiency levels in order to allow meaning negotiation to take place. This negotiation of meaning provides L2 learners the context for language input and output as well as the attention to form besides making learners clear of their responses to the teachers’ feedback on the production of language or output (Doyle, Goh & Zhang, 2004). Again, the teacher is fully responsible for the engagement of negotiation of meaning during classroom interaction. Therefore, various types of teacher talk are employed by teachers to deliver their input to the students during classroom instruction or

interaction (Tsui, 1995). This allows learners to obtain feedback about their language use and especially their errors made (Hatch, 1978; Long, 1996; Pica, 1994; Swain & Lapkin, 1998 in Doyle, Goh & Zhang, 2004) to ensure the input provided is comprehensible to give way to meaning negotiation and consequently foster language learning.

In addition to that, it has been noted by current ELT practitioners that teacher talk is a potential source of comprehensible input for the learners (Cullen, 1998) to boost language learning through constant meaning negotiation and feedback. However, studies have shown that in most ESL classrooms, a major part of its interaction is generated by the teacher asking questions. According to Tsui (1995), a typical English lesson in a Hong Kong classroom contains nearly 70 per cent of teacher talk with teacher asking questions, nominating a student to answer the question, the student answering the question and the teacher providing the feedback to the response. Furthermore, Doyle et al. (2004), agreed that such dominance of teacher talk in the classroom also persists in Malaysia where it functions as a technique to check learners' comprehension, to ensure they have acquired the knowledge imparted, to focus their attention and participate in the lesson, to move the lesson forward and to exercise their disciplinary control. The sequence is usually being identified as a three-part exchange: initiate – reply – evaluate (IRE).

This is crucial as the dominance of teacher talk happens in most ESL classrooms especially in countries or locations where the teacher is the main provider of language input (Nunan, 1989). Nunan further elaborated that such situation fits

most of the ESL classrooms such as those in Malaysia where the amount of teacher talk by English language teachers is predominantly high. According to Brock (1986), there is evidence from classroom research that certain aspects of teacher talk, such as the kind of questions the teacher asked, can significantly affect the quality of student interaction (as cited in Cullen, 1998). Most of aspects are closely related to communicative strategies (CS) used by the teacher in delivering his or her lesson particularly in ESL or EFL context.

Many studies have been done by key researchers in order to identify CS from the learners' perspective in the scope of how context, culture, tasks, language proficiency affecting their use of CS to make their communication goals a success (Barbara, 2004; Bialystok & Frohlich, 1980; Flyman, 1997; Paribakht, 1985; Wongsawang, 2001). These studies have offered some insights regarding the use of CS among the learners in different aspects but have rarely touched on how teachers use CS to cope with the learners for these different perspectives while delivering their lesson through the various types of teacher talk. On the other hand, Dörnyei and Thurrell (1991) agreed that CS is often neglected especially by the language experts or teachers. Therefore, there is a need to look into how these expert speakers, the teachers, "manipulate" the different types of teacher talk in transmitting comprehensible input to L2 learners (Krashen, 1981) of different proficiency levels through classroom interactions which could enable language learning to take place. By shifting the attention to the teacher as the central provider of comprehensible language input in classroom exchanges, it is the interest of this study to find out to



what extent the proficiency of the learners has relevant and important effect on teacher in using CS in their teacher talk during instructions or classroom interactions.

## **1.2 Statement of the problem**

The purpose of this study is to investigate how teachers manoeuvre their teacher talk in classroom interaction by using CS to compensate the students' level of proficiency. Specifically, the study focused on the following research objectives in addressing the research problem:

- i) To identify and compare the types of CS used by the teacher in both high and low proficiency classes.
- ii) To determine the relationship between CS used and types of teacher talk in both high and low proficiency classes.

## **1.3 Significance of the study**

The result of this study would provide an in-depth understanding on how learners' proficiency level affects the use of CS by the language expert (teachers) to help learners to acquire language skills and at the same time offer opportunities for meaning negotiation in promoting learners' language learning. The information eventually assist teachers in conducting an effective instruction especially for the novice language teachers who have not had much experience in adapting to the learners' demand or expectations of language learning in particular.

In relation to the self-monitoring theory suggested by Krashen (1981), this study can eventually help teachers to be conscious of their usage of teacher talk as

well as the CS used within the teacher talk according to the needs of language learning of different proficiency levels. This consciousness thus assists the development of the teachers' self improvement through self-reflection and self-evaluation. Consequently, this lends a hand for teachers to maximise the learning capability of the learners of different proficiency levels.

In terms of theoretical contributions, the present study managed to identify additional types of teacher talk (refer to Chapter Three) which are not available in the chosen framework. This would be beneficial for future analysis of multifaceted teacher talk in ESL classrooms especially in Malaysia. Hence, it served as a refinement of the Flander's Interaction Analysis Category (FLAC) framework (Nunan, 1989 in McDonough & McDonough, 1997). In terms of CS, the present study proved that the choice of CS by teachers was also greatly affected by the proficiency level of the students mainly to accommodate their language deficiency for making the lessons effective. Moreover, this study seconded the proposal of Clennell (1995) to reclassify the traditional CS. Clennell argued that, the functions of CS do not restricted to "communication problem-solving phenomena" but more to the role of "negotiation and interaction in SLA" (p. 5). Similarly, in this study, it shows that CS do not only used by teachers to solve communication problem but more to act as a tool for them to maintain their classroom interactions in their lessons.

## 1.4 Operational definition of terms

### 1.4.1 Communication strategies

CS is used not only for solving communication problems but also maintaining the interaction and enhancing the message. It is hypothetically assumed that teacher talk may consist of these elements in order to transform the comprehensible input and achieve meaning negotiation between learners and the teacher. Hence, a taxonomy (as shown in the Table 1 below) is designed by adapting the three perspectives of CS from Clennell (1995), Faerch and Kasper (1984) and Tarone (1978) mentioned earlier. However, the designed taxonomy is mainly adapted from Tarone's taxonomy (1978, cited in Tarone, 1980) as it is presupposed that classroom interaction is ideally a "mutual attempt" of both the teacher and students to attain shared communicative meaning.

Table 1

*Framework of CS adapted from the three perspectives of CS*

<b>Paraphrasing</b>	<b>Approximation</b>	Use of a single target language vocabulary item or structure, which the learner knows is not correct, but which shares enough semantic features in common with the desired item to satisfy the speaker e.g. "pipe" for "waterpipe"
	<b>Word coinage</b>	The learner makes up a new word in order to communicate a desired concept e.g. "airball" for "balloon"
	<b>Circumlocution</b>	The learner describes the characteristics or elements of the object or action instead of using appropriate TL structure e.g. she is uh, smoking something, I don't know what's its name. that's uh, Persian, and we use in



<b>repetition</b>	<p>the interlocutor to act as a function of discourse or topic maintenance, topic salience marker, appeal for assistance and request for clarification.(Clennell, 1995)</p> <p>e.g.</p> <p>B: no yeah +</p> <p>M: pencil its jus a line + is it + because I have a ruler +</p> <p>B: but probably I don't know what means ruler +</p> <p>M: something to measure +</p> <p>B: to measure + yes + so it's ruler</p>
<b>Tonicity</b>	<p>It is a systematic use of stress and pitch of the speaker to mark the information, indicate comprehension, ask for clarification, salience to discourse, add emphasis and to mark the significance of the information.(Clennell, 1995)</p> <p>e.g.</p> <p>S: \ ruler \ yeah+ one \ [lubber] + \ yes+</p> <p>A: and one \ [lubber]+ one</p> <p>S: what does it mean \ [lubber] +</p> <p>A: \ [lubber] + when+when+you</p> <p>S: ah \ rubber \ yes +</p> <p>A: write \ something by / \ pencil+ \ yes +</p> <p>S: one \ rubber er + there isn't / \ rubber in +our photograph</p> <p>A: and one / [krip]+</p>
<b>Topic fronting</b>	<p>Stating the topic before the comment of the utterance to emphasise the topic and thus making the topic more salient and easier to process.(Clennell, 1995)</p> <p>e.g.</p> <p><i>Topic</i> <i>Comment</i></p> <p>H: what about your \ ruler + + one \ small and + mm + one large</p>

#### 1.4.2 High proficiency

High proficiency in English in this study refers to classes where a majority of the students scored well in their PMR English language test as well as their school-based assessment (mid-term) by scoring at least grade A and B. As the classes have been streamed according to their overall proficiency level of all subjects by the

school, in this case, the high proficiency classes would be from class Form 4A to Form 4C and Form 5A to Form 5D.

#### **1.4.3 Low proficiency**

On the other hand, low proficiency refers to the classes that a majority of the students obtained grade D and E or F for their English language subject in their PMR examination and school-based assessment (mid-term). Thus, the classes for low proficiency would be class Form 4F to Form 4H and Form 5G to Form 5J.

#### **1.4.4 Teacher talk**

Teacher talk is a general term for different types of teacher talk which Ellis (1988) referred to as “the special language the teacher uses when addressing L2 learners in the classroom” (Ellis, 1988, p. 96). It can be categorized according to the linguistic aspect and functions. In this study, teacher talk is categorized according to the coding system of Flander’s Interaction Analysis Category (FLAC) developed by Bowers (Nunan, 1989 in McDonough & McDonough, 1997) (see Table 2).

Flanders (1970) explained that "techniques for analysing classroom interaction are based on the notion that these reciprocal contacts can be perceived as a series of events which occur one after another" (Flanders, 1970, in Tarricone & Fetherston, 2002, p. 1). According to Tarricone and Fetherston (2002), this technique is particularly useful to obtain information about teacher behaviour which is extensively used for classroom observation studies. It is also a system to code

spontaneous verbal communication in classroom (Tarricone & Fetherston, 2002). In addition, McDonough and McDonough (1997) also suggested that, FLAC is one of what Nunan claimed “as the most user-friendly by teachers” which enable real-time observations or analysis on recording transcripts. Besides, it serves as a checklist of categories to categorise verbal behaviour especially in classroom observations. (McDonough & McDonough, 1997)

Besides, it provides the observer as well as the consulting teacher the ability to draw conclusions on the verbal climate and the ability to make inferences about the communication strategies fostered in the classroom. Classroom talk is the combination of the three aspects stated – teacher talk, students talk and the last and shared aspect by two parties, silence (Tarricone & Fetherston, 2002). However, only two from the three aspects are used in this study to check on the presence of teacher talk in the ESL classroom interactions later. They are teacher talk and silence which made up a total of eight types of observable teacher talk type in classroom interactions.

Table 2

*Framework on types of teacher talk adapted from Flander's Interaction Analysis Category (FLAC)*

Classroom Interactions	Types of Interactions	Subtypes of Interactions
<b>Teacher Talk</b>	<b>Response</b>	<p>1. <b>Accepts feeling.</b> Accepts and clarifies an attitude or the feeling tone of a pupil in a non-threatening manner. Feelings may be positive or negative. Predicting and recalling feelings are included.</p> <p>2. <b>Praises or encourages.</b> Praises or encourages pupil action or behaviour. Jokes that release tension, but not at the expense of another individual: nodding head, or saying 'Um hm?' or 'Go on' are included.</p> <p>3. <b>Accepts or uses ideas of pupils.</b> Clarifying, building or developing ideas suggested by a pupil. Teacher extensions of pupil ideas are included but as the teacher brings more of his own ideas into play, shift to category five.</p>
		<p>4. <b>Asks questions.</b> Asking a question about content or procedure, based on teacher ideas, with the intent that a pupil will answer.</p>
	<b>Initiation</b>	<p>5. <b>Lecturing.</b> Giving facts or opinions about content or procedures: expressing <i>his own</i> ideas, giving <i>his own</i> explanation or citing an authority other than a pupil.</p> <p>6. <b>Giving directions.</b> Directions, commands or orders to which a pupil is expected to comply.</p> <p>7. <b>Criticising or justifying authority.</b> Statements intended to change pupil behaviour from non-acceptable to acceptable pattern; bawling someone out; stating why the teacher is doing what he is doing; extreme self-defence.</p>
<b>Pupil Talk</b>	<b>Response</b>	<p>8. <b>Pupil talk – response.</b> Talk by pupils in response to teacher. Teacher initiates the contact or solicits pupil statement or structures the situation. Freedom to express own ideas is limited.</p>
	<b>Initiation</b>	<p>9. <b>Pupil talk – initiation.</b> Talk by pupils which they initiate. Expressing own ideas; initiating a new topic; freedom to develop opinions and a line of thought, like asking thoughtful questions: going beyond the existing structure.</p>
<b>Silence</b>		<p>10. <b>Silence or confusion.</b> Pauses, short periods of silence and periods of confusion in which communication cannot be understood by the observer.</p>